

The Circulation of Traditional Theatrical Practices on Different Media Formats: The Cambodian *Lakhon Bassac* Opera on TV and Social Media^{*}

Francesca Billeri^{**} La Sapienza Università di Roma

At present, in Cambodia, the spread of mass media and digital media is fuelling popularity-focused processes of adaptation to new socioeconomic trends and transformation within popular theatre genres such as the Vietnamese-Chinese influenced opera lakhon bassac. Whereas classical dance is internationally renowned and considered an icon of Cambodian culture, lakhon bassac is relatively unknown outside of Cambodian communities. It is considered less representative of Cambodian culture primarily due to its foreign origins. However, it is very popular among the Khmers, especially in rural areas and on old and new media. Lakhon bassac is considered as Khmer tradition as it expresses Khmer social and cultural principles. Nowadays, traditional genres have adapted in response to new audiences and performance contexts through the introduction of "special effects" and digital strategies changing the function of traditional instruments, songs, characters and storylines. Traditional genres that were once embedded in oral tradition and functioned within traditional theatres' performing context, which consisted of a mat surrounded by the audience in rural villages, are nowadays being moved onto modern theatrical stages and screens, and into new media formats. This not only makes them available to a larger percentage of society, but also transforms the very nature of these cultural practices and reflects social and political aspects of contemporary Cambodia. This paper explores the interrelation between culture and the media system mirroring the transformation of a traditional theatre genre, lakhon bassac, in its migration to other media. How is the traditional performance of lakhon bassac transformed into the television context? How is the television performance of this traditional genre transformed and used on the social media? And what is the relationship between television and social media performances? Through selected performances of the sung-danced drama lakhon bassac on TV and social media, particularly Facebook and YouTube, this paper introduces a comparative perspective between television and digital transmediality.

Keywords: Cambodian theatre; mediatisation; remediation; intermediality; transmediality

Lakhon bassac theatre is characterized by alternating dialogues, recitatives, songs, and acrobatic pantomimes, as in the Chinese theatre. The name of *lakhon bassac* derives from the Bassac River area in South Vietnam, where it originated at the end of the nineteenth century. Pich Tum (1997) portrays the Bassac River as a multi-ethnic area where the local Khmer population (known as Khmer Krom) absorbed and adapted foreign influences and components in their traditions, including theatrical (Billeri, 2021). As *Lakhon bassac* historically demonstrate a great adaptability in appropriating and indigenizing features from

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^{**} billerisok@gmail.com

other art forms and other cultures, it is particularly interesting to look at the intricate ways such malleability applies to the adaptation of *lakhon bassac* to new performing contexts, such as television, and its circulation and on social media. The sung-danced Cambodian popular theatre *lakhon bassac*, which is traditionally performed on stage in rural areas, nowadays, moved onto new media formats, particularly on TV and social media becoming "presentational" (Turino, 2008). This passage has created a new form of *lakhon bassac* and enhanced its popularity among the Khmers in Cambodia and abroad.

This reflects the increasing significance of performance in contemporary culture and society (Fischer-Lichte, 2004) and it is in particular due to the all embracing mediatisation of culture and society as it occurred in the advent and fast growth of mass media such as film and television in the course of the 20th century and then in the proliferation of the rapid evolution of digital information and communication technologies over the past three decades. The idea has been formulated in a variety of different terms, such as the "society of the spectacle" (Debord, 1967) and incorporated almost everywhere into "performative society" (Kershaw, 2003).

In this paper, I will analyze the passage from traditional to (re)mediated *lakhon bassac* performances through their migration to different media systems by analysing the changes of some "original" aspects such as the use and function of peculiar instruments and songs; the new interaction between audience and some characters such as the clowns; and the politically-controlled themes of the story's plots. Successively, I analyse the remediation of TV recorded performances on social media, specifically on Facebook, by discussing the different strategies adopted by *lakhon bassac* artists to promote the *lakhon bassac* genre and their artistic talent and creativity. This shows the role of social media in promoting and disseminating the staged and televised *lakhon bassac* performances among a larger audience, including the young generations, thanks to the widespread use of internet and smartphones, especially in rural areas of Cambodia.

The process of popularizing traditional musical and theatre genres is produced and supported by the mediation and remediation of traditional ritual and theatre performances on TV and the internet. The concept of mediation involves a transformative process in various fields such as musicology, literature, film, history, arts, music, etc. Krämer's definition of the mediation of music as "a transformation or innovation of institutions, that is, forms of conceiving music and dealing with music" (2011, p. 473) shows the historical development of the mediatisation process which is based on technological as well as social change. Although the terms mediation and mediatisation are often used interchangeably in theatre studies (Auslander, 1999; Fischer-Lichte, 2001), they can be distinguished as the term "mediation" looks at the human condition as intrinsically mediated while the term "mediatisation" is defined as "a historically localised process that takes into consideration the growing social relevance of media" (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 3).

As a result, in this paper I will adopt the term "mediatisation." By mediatisation, following some scholars (Krotz, 2007; Hjarvard, 2013; Boccia Artieri, 2015; Couldry & Hepp, 2017), I mean a meta-framework which observes the dynamics underlying the social construction of reality as increasingly influenced by media, understood both as technologies and sense-making processes. Consequently, TV and the Internet do not simply reproduce or reflect

music traditions: they play an important role in their shaping and reception. The mediatisation process is connected to the concept of transmediality which is "the transfer from one medium to another medium (medium change)"(Kattenbelt, 2008, p.23) and intermediality, "the co-relation of different media in a mutual influencing way" (p.23). This has been called by Bolter and Grusin as "remediation" which is "the representation of one medium in another" and "as a defining characteristic of new digital media" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 45). Televised and traditional performances of *lakhon bassac* are remediated online via social media, live streaming and YouTube uploads by artists and TV channels with the aims of "refashioning" and extending old media. In this paper I will use the term "remediation" as considered by Bolter and Grusin to distinguish different forms or grades of remediation dependent on the specific effect that is desired by the artists.

Borrowing some remediation strategies argued by Bolter and Grusin, such as hypermediacy and transparency, I discuss how *lakhon bassac* artists use them to appeal to the viewers and to increase the number of followers. For example, OI Samang, a well-known *lakhon bassac* theatre artist, uses photomontages to create the covers of his videos for his Facebook pages and YouTube channel. In these videos, he sings representative *lakhon bassac* songs extracted from the original theatre context using Western instruments in order to "modernise" them, to appeal to the young, and to promote his talent and theatre troupe. Social media has the potential to expand the ways in which spectators engage a theatre work, and, equally importantly, the range of spectators engaging a theatre work. To explore the migration and circulation of *lakhon bassac* into different media formats I selected *lakhon bassac* performances on TV and social media by a well-known theatre troupe, OI Samang Lakhon Bassac Phnom Penh (OSLB).¹

Lakhon bassac: From staged performances to recorded televised performances

Outside a TV context, *lakhon bassac* is performed whenever hosts request it, although the most frequently chosen times are following Buddhist festivities. The most renowned troupes of the villages are engaged to perform for Buddhist celebrations. A wooden stage is built by a group of workmen, engaged and supervised by the troupe's leader, in the space surrounding the pagoda where there are traditional food stalls, bumper cars, and other amusements to entertain followers. In the past, performers sat in a circle and got up to perform when their turn came. Initially, the audience simply sat around them. Later, performers added a curtain for a backdrop, and after a character had finished performing, he or she went behind it. Eventually, the event became a fully staged dramatic performance, including several scenery cloths. In the traditional performing context, the stories are chosen by the group's leader or people who have requested the show, such as the pagoda's administrators, mainly according to the audience's preference.

Lakhon bassac stories are based on traditional legends and stories, episodes from the epic poem *Reamker* or they are translations of Chinese works that are adapted to different

themes such as comedy, tragedy, love, and war. The audience is composed of followers who joined the ceremony in the temple as well as people coming from the neighboring villages. People gather at the temple in the evening bringing food, bamboo mats and blankets to spend the night on the floor to see the performance (Figure 1).

In the village performances, the audience interacts with the clowns who are an element of fun and entertainment and serve as narrators during the development of the plot of the story. They improvise around a minimal plot and are inspired by the audience and its reactions. For example, sometimes they joke with some members of the audience. The audience appreciates them, and the success of a show depends on the clowns' performance. "Sometimes, at the end of the performance, the audience ask them to play something else", Samang said. People wander around and get back to their seats in time to catch particular episodes, especially the funny ones. The interaction between the audiences and the performers is common to popular live Cambodian performances (such as rural masked theatre *lakhon khol*, or Buddhist parades *chayyam*, for examples).

The Cambodian audience needs to be engaged and "warmed up" by the characters, Samang said. If people like the clowns and the story, they will invite their friends and relatives to attend the performance. Consequently, the troupe's leader extends the length of the performance according to the audience's reaction and the number of people who remain until the end of the performance. Discussing a similar situation in the broadcast of Balinese theatre, Hobart notes that "Television inhibits this dialogue but does not eradicate it: the addressee is still there, but under different discursive conditions" (Hobart, 2000, p. 202). In the television studio, the clowns do not improvise by being inspired by the audience but follow a script which is carefully checked by the TV producer to ensure that the government would not object to it and that the audience would like it. Their funny sketches are usually addressed to some characters of the stories and their actions.

Television and radio stations are subject to a tighter government control and most of the TV channels are owed by members of the Prime Minister's family or his political party. Therefore, in the television context, particular attention is paid to the dramatic contents that pay tribute to Khmer cultural, political, and social values. Some TV channels such as the main national TV channel, TVK, pre-check the story to ensure that it is written by a known writer; while the CTN and Bayon channels allow the troupe's leader to choose the story to perform. In either case the plot is still carefully checked to guarantee conformation to political and socio-cultural values.

For example, during an episode of a TV musical contest, "Khmer Cultural Heritage," broadcast on Bayon TV in 2015, the TV producer changed the name of a scene within the story of the Prince Preah Chan's journey to his wife's house, the aquatic realm of the mythical *naga* serpents. "Preah Chan Korup" (Respecting the Moon) story is constructed around a series of betrayals and their consequences. For the show, the scriptwriter (OI Samang) titled a scene "Manara [the protagonist] betrays her husband." Sou Chamraun, the Bayon TV producer, decided not to broadcast this title because it was morally inappropriate, and the government could have criticized this kind of information. He thus changed the title to "Do not follow the master's precept".

Pav Mengsrun, TV producer of the most important Cambodian television channel, TVK, in a recent interview explained the process of choosing the story for the recording of "Tep Sangva" (the protagonists' name) story in July 2022, written by OI Samang,² as follow:

OI Samang first wrote a new story based on a Khmer ancient story and then discussed with me whether we can produce this story. I met him twice to better understand the story before being produced (...) TVK is very strict with the language and gestures and the way the performers dress up. I check the story with OI Samang. However, to avoid any mistake, I also encourage him to consult with the experts at Ministry of Information, of Culture and Religion or with professors working at the University of Fine Arts, so they can confirm with us whether the story is appropriate for TV broadcasting (interview, August 13, 2022).

In 2015 I attended a live staged performance of the old love story "Tep Sangva" in Kompong Cham province.³ The performance started around eight in the evening and last for ten hours. The same story was broadcast in episodes on TVK every Saturday at 9.30pm from August 2022 to September 2022. Each month they broadcast four episodes. Each episode lasted one hour. The group's leader and the TV producer select ten scenes from the original story.⁴ In the television context, OI Samang's troupe, composed by forty performers, was reduced to fifteen characters. The TV director gave detailed instructions to the performers on their position on the stage, the structure and length of the scenes and the corresponding songs.

As a result, the group's leader, who writes the stories and chooses the songs, has to reshape and shorten significantly the original long stories and the related number of songs in a way that the audience can follow and understand the development of the full original story throughout the episodes. For example, the lengthy and numerous scenes relating to Tep Sangva's and Chao Phirun's adventurous journey were shortened to four scenes while in the traditional performance in the village I attended in 2015, it lasted eight scenes. As a result, many songs are omitted accordingly creating a sort of "summary" of the original *lakhon bassac* performance.

In addition to the shortened length of the performance, the function of some songs such as the four songs performed backstage before the start of the performance changes. According to local beliefs in supernatural spirits, these songs are performed as an offering to the ancestors' spirits and deities to ask permission to build the stage and ensure a good performance. In addition, they signal the start of the performance for the audience. In the TV recorded episodes of "Tep Sangva," they are used as a kind of jingle at the beginning of each episode to introduce each actor and the corresponding character they play. They were also used for the production of the trailer advertised on Facebook).⁵

An additional aspect of the transmedial evolution of *lakhon bassac* from staged to TV performances is the use of special effects to make the scenes more real and appealing to the audience. In the traditional setting the sound of the giants' footprints or the sounds of the swords during a scene of battle or the sound of the thunderstorms are reproduced by the drum (*skor bassac*) and the two gongs (*lao*) whose sound identifies this genre. In the television context, the onomatopoeic sounds produced by these instruments are replaced by the use of recorded sounds reproducing the voices of the forest, explosions, adverse weather conditions etc. In addition, mechanical and visual special effects are used within

the narration of the story. For example, mechanical effects are used in scenes of weather effects such as sprinkler systems to create rain and fog machines to create smoke (Figure 2). In other scenes of the same story digital visual effects, such as compositing, are used. For example, in the first episode, the scene of the kidnapping of the child Prince Chao Phirun by an eagle is produced by combining multiple images (those of the eagle, the forest and the child, to make a final image of the Prince flying with the eagle on the forest and, successively, the image of the child landing on the forest standing on a cloud.⁶

For this reason, not only television performances are appealing to the young generations but also the old generations as they "make the narration more real" as an old lady attending a performance in Kompong Cham province said. This shows the "double logic" of remediation (transparency and hypermediacy) which aim at exceeding the restrictions of representation in order to intensify the experience of the real, even in those cases in which we know that the real is everything but real, but it could be real (Bolter & Grusin, 1999).



Figure 1 - The stage and the audience before a performance in Kampong Cham province



Figure 2 - A scene from "Tep Sangva" story, episode 1, broadcast on TVK, August 8, 2022

Lakhon bassac televised performances and cumrieng bassac singing on social media

Although TV channels have their Facebook page and official YouTube pages, artists curate their own independent media presence online. In 2015 TV in Cambodia was the most important source, followed by Facebook and the Internet. Radio was the third-most important source. In 2016 Facebook and Internet became the most important channel through which Cambodians access information (30%), surpassing television (29%) and almost doubling radio (15%) and it has continues to gain market share over the past few years (Phong, Srou, & Solá, 2016). Television in Cambodia is seen as a source of political propaganda and entertainment, and not as a major provider of news and current affairs (Strangio, 2016). Some producers said that their coverage shows the duty and competence of the government. This has more recently encompassed social media, which surpassed old media as a new source for Cambodians in 2017. In the same year, the Prime Minister Hun Sen's official page was the eighth-most liked Facebook page of any world leader and as of December 2020 was the most liked Facebook page in Cambodia. He has recently established a cyber team who controls the information shared on social media. Artists post videos and news relating to the Prime Minister to share the political and cultural ideology of the ruling party.

In July 2022, OI Samang reported the Prime Minister Hun Sen's post who has called for an end to "the immoral acts of some couples who are arguing on social media after communal divisions" and asked the separate couple not to tear each other up on Facebook, but respect each other, especially their children. TV producers and scriptwriters must ensure that this kind of issue is not evoked in *lakhon bassac* stories which are broadcast on TV. In addition, artists show the affiliation with the government as a way of promoting themselves and their group. For example, OI Samang frequently uploads videos portraying members of his group wearing *bassac* costumes and pictures of himself during a cultural festival in 2014 when he was awarded by the Prime Minister and his wife as the best scriptwriter.

Besides videos showing political affiliation and professional achievements, OI Samang post TV performances, such as the episodes of "Tep Sangva", on Facebook and YouTube. During an interview he explained that TV performances allow him to gain more clients and audience, and even people in the villages like watching televised *lakhon bassac* performances posted on social media:

People in the countryside like watching *lakhon bassac* on television but they mostly use smartphones. TV performances are broadcast every week but they can watch the performances on the smartphone as many times as they want. Some families, especially the younger members who can afford to buy smartphones, show old people how to use it and watch *lakhon bassac*. From my experience, old people use their grandchildren's smartphones to watch *lakhon bassac* (interview, August 8, 2022).

Most young people access internet from mobile phones. The wide use of smartphones in rural area is facilitated by relatively affordable internet connections offered by local mobile

companies. Although Cambodia is one of the least developed countries in Asia as onethird of the population live below the national poverty line, most rural Cambodians have access to a mobile phone. According to a survey conducted by USAID and The Asia Foundation in 2016, 48% of Cambodians aged 15-65 were found to have at least one smartphone. Also the ability to display Khmer scripts is more common in smartphones (90%). The three most important reasons for seeking access to Internet were given as: 1) for entertainment (music, movies, TV programmes) 74.4%; 2) to get news (33.2%); 3) to access information on various topics (health, agriculture, culture, etc,) 30.2% (Phong et al., 2016).

Not only social media are used by performers and TV channels to disseminate *lakhon bassac* performances and make them available to a larger portion of society, but are also used by the performers to advertise their creativity in producing videos as a sort of extension of the traditional *lakhon bassac* performance to be posted on Facebook and uploaded on YouTube. To popularize the *lakhon bassac* songs and appeal to the audience, the covers of these videos portray OI Samang posing with an outfit similar to that of the famous popular music singer of the 1950s, Sinn Sisamouth, and national symbols of Cambodia such as palm trees, Angkor temples, rice fields, and *champei* flowers (magnolias) as background. In these videos *lakhon bassac* songs are extracted from the theatre performance and sung on their own. This practice is called *cumrieng bassac* (*bassac* singing). These videos show the co-relation of television and social media which reflects the concept of intermediality.



Figure 3 - OI Samang's video cover showing the titles of the bassac songs (cumrieng bassac) on his Facebook page. Posted by OI Samang on September 19, 2018

The first part of these videos consist of excerpts TV *lakhon bassac* performances and the second part suddenly switch to the portrait of OI Samang, as showed in the cover, singing *bassac* songs.⁷ Using one of the remediation strategies argued by Bolter and Grusin, the hypermediacy, in which the focus is on the presence of the medium, OI

Samang creates his videos by using specific software such as Photoshop or Video Editor. As he explained, the modern and the traditional are visually and musically mixed so that *lakhon bassac* can attract the viewers online and he can get more likes and shares on Facebook and YouTube. Social media holds a lot of potential to help artists and theatre companies in their efforts to encourage the public to follow their personal, social and professional lives, and their motivations for producing their work, so that they will be more interested in coming along to their shows.

Conclusion

The mediatisation of traditional theatrical practices such as *lakhon bassac* shows the transformation and adaptation of "original" and peculiar features of this theatre genre to the TV context such as: the new function of "ritual" songs; the new dynamics underlying the role of the clowns in warming up the audience; the political control exerted on the story's plots in TV performances; and the introduction of special effects that not only are used to appeal to a wider audience but also to enhance the traditional staged performance. The introduction of digital technology and other media within theatrical performances can be considered as a process of re-construction which creates new modes of representation and new ways of structuring images, sounds, words and positioning the characters and a re-perception of the whole (Kattenbelt, 2006).

As Hadley (2017) analyses, the relationship between theatre and social media now concerns a much broader spectrum of meaning-making possibilities: in the use of social media for the construction of intermedial performances, in the dissemination of performances, in the processes of audience development, for documentation and archiving and in the performative aspects concerning the daily use of social media. The daily online presence of performance artists and companies is little investigated but it is a crucial issue considering how the development of social media constitutes a drive towards the aestheticisation of the everyday (Gemini, 2009), where performativity imbues personal self-narrations (Page, 2013; Lavender, 2016), as well as the techniques of managing visibility and celebrity (Marwick, 2013).

Social media makes more tools for establishing, managing and maintaining a relationship with an audience in what Bennett (1997) calls the "outer frame" of theatrical production, outside the theatre. Maintaining an audience for a theatre maker's work is very important and it can be considered as marketing activities which go well beyond simply telling spectators that a show is on. More than just a synonym for advertising, promoting and publicising a show to an audience, marketing is a strategic process by which an artist identifies, for example, which parts/scenes of the theatre performance will appeal to audiences. For example, the funny scenes performed by two clowns are often chosen to advertise the *lakhon bassac* performance online since the success of a performance and the ability of a group mostly depends on the clowns' skills. Gemini and Brilli (2020) in their study of the transmedia work "Aldo Morto 54" by the Italian theatre company Frosini/Timpano (2013), show the redefinition of the boundaries of theatrical performances

(between live and recorded, text and paratext, artistic and promotional uses of social media) which is reflected in the process of mediatisation of the performing arts indicated by these authors as well as in the *lakhon bassac* performances on social media which are used not only to promote OI Samang's group and the *lakhon bassac* genre in general but also to show OI Samang's artistic talent and marketing skills such as finding new ways of getting popularity and increase his income.

Posting information about their day-to-day work, interests, successes help artists to give a sense of who they are, what they do, when, why and how. This is also often followed by the decision to go beyond traditional newsletter-type communications and share information about training, auditions, and rehearsals. OI Samang has recently posted pictures and videos of the rehearsal of "Tep Sangva" at the TVK studio where the troupe lived for 15 days. These videos not only showed the time when the group rehearsed but also the "private" life of the theatre members: making food, eating, breastfeeding, etc. This is another way to promote the group and show the audience how the theatre performance intersects with the artists' life. The transmedial and medial evolution of *lakhon bassac* shows how pre-existing medium-specific conventions have been altered, allowing for the exploration of new dimensions of perception and experience. Mediation and remediation processes of traditional practices are not only a topic of study but also a framework for the study of un-known traditional theatrical genres performed in new performing contexts, the underlying sociocultural and political dynamics, and the impact of different media on "original" features of traditional theatre performances.

Biographical Note

Francesca Billeri is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Sapienza University of Rome. She received a PhD in Music in 2019 at SOAS University of London. Currently, Billeri is working on "Digital sound archives as a tool for research and restitution to the communities in Cambodia" project. She is especially interested in the impact of media on traditional music in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Cambodia; the ongoing socio-cultural and political dynamics involved in processes of preservation and promotion of Khmer traditional performing operated by local NGOs and mass media; the role and professionalism of artists and musicians within the media system and in Khmer society. She has published articles in *Asian Music, Asian Theatre, Asian Musicology* and *Bloomsbury* (London), among others. Building on research she has conducted on media, politics and music she is publishing her first research monograph with *Bloomsbury*'s "New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media" series.

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Note

¹ The information provided in this paper is the result of a period of extensive participant-observation fieldwork carried out in 2015 and 2022 in Phnom Penh city, where the main local and national television studios are based. I conducted interviews in person, and recently remotely, with TV producers and musicians working for important Cambodian TV channels and attended *lakhon bassac* performances in TV studios and in the villages. By selecting OI Samang Lakhon Bassac Phnom Penh (OSLB) as a case study, I examine the performances held in more traditional venues and in more traditional styles, for comparison with those geared towards media contexts. Finally, I conduct an analysis of carefully selected representative examples of traditional and televised music and performance uploads on Facebook and YouTube, as posted by TV producers and OSLB's group leader, OI Samang.

² Musicians and theatre troupes working for the government are regularly invited to perform on television. Beyond financial security and media visibility, they are rewarded with honorific titles by the ministry. Therefore, political affiliation is also a way to earn them a reputation as powerful well-renowned and successful performers. Currently, OI Samang is the advisor of the Ministry of Information who is in charge of managing TVK and ensuring a strict pre-broadcast censorship of sensitive issues.

³ This is a love story between the son and daughter of two royal houses. The prince Chao Phirun has been kidnapped by an eagle during a walk with his parents. He was raised by the hermit Eysey who sighted the eagle using his magical powers so that the child fell into his arms. When Prince Chao Phirun grew up he went on a journey in search of his parents. During this journey he met the princess Tep Sangva. The two fell in love and continued the journey to the princess's house, facing various adventures. The story ends up with the royal wedding of Tep Sangva and Chao Phirun.

⁴ One or two *lakhon bassac* stories are broadcast every two years by TVK and these programmes are sponsored by the Ministry of Economy.

⁵ Trailer of "Tep Sangva" story, posted by OSLB group, November 3, 2022

https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=saved&v=824313445357598

⁶ "Tep Sangva" story, episode 1, posted by TVK channel, September 4, 2022

https://www.facebook.com/tvkchannel7/videos/1420615318424182

⁷ Lakhon bassac performance and cumring bassac singing posted by OI Samang, September 19, 2018 https://www.facebook.com/oI.samang.395/videos/136547003962564